



STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
Department of Genetics

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Dr. Boris Ephrussi
Centre de Genetique Moleculaire
Ministere de l'Education Nationale
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
91 Gif-Sur-Yvette FRANCE

Dear Boris,

I was very glad to get your note of September 25th. I think that if you saw only my letter to Nature and not the Wyatt paper to which it was addressed, you might think that I was insufficiently critical about the attitudes of some of the leading geneticists about Avery in 1944. There is no question that at that time very few people appreciated the seminal significance of Avery's findings, although it was discussed very widely and surely no one thought that it was unimportant. What is difficult to remember in hindsight is how unsure we had to be at that time about a specific interpretation of those findings, and Avery's own refusal to commit himself to any speculations certainly contributed to the aura of bafflement. It really was very clear-sighted of Harriett to jump from the traditions of the Zoology Department and to see how exciting an opportunity it would be to work with him. The main point that Wyatt made, with which I have to disagree, is that Avery's work was literally "overlooked", in the sense that the geneticists were not even aware of it. Harriett herself undoubtedly played an important role in preventing such an eventuality, but we should also recall that Dobzhansky spent considerable space on the transformation phenomenon, and referred to it in the context of Avery's laboratory, in his book on "The Origin of Species". I have a very firm recollection, shared by many others, that this reference was very widely discussed among geneticists in the early 40's. The main point, in my mind, is that many geneticists were simply unprepared to examine any observations on bacteria as relevant to the main stream of the science. And, of course, by and large the microbiologists had exactly converse prejudices. I am enclosing the fragments that Harriett did send me of the paper that I asked you about in hopes that this might remind you of what I was looking for. It would be unfortunate if the rest of that draft has disappeared, but perhaps Rollin or someone else, in fact, has it, and I will make a parallel inquiry.

I am glad to know that it will be worth trying to contact you in Paris next summer, and I will write you further about that when our own possible plans are in clearer sight.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

Boris - I am sure this kind of digging into the past must carry some pain, but I hope this is also ameliorated by the report and signed for Harriett which it substantiates. You know I have only the warmest feelings for you.

Enclosure
LT. P. KENNEDY, JR. LABORATORIES FOR MOLECULAR MEDICINE, DEDICATED TO RESEARCH IN MENTAL RETARDATION
MOLECULAR BIOLOGY HEREDITY NEUROBIOLOGY DEVELOPMENTAL MEDICINE